

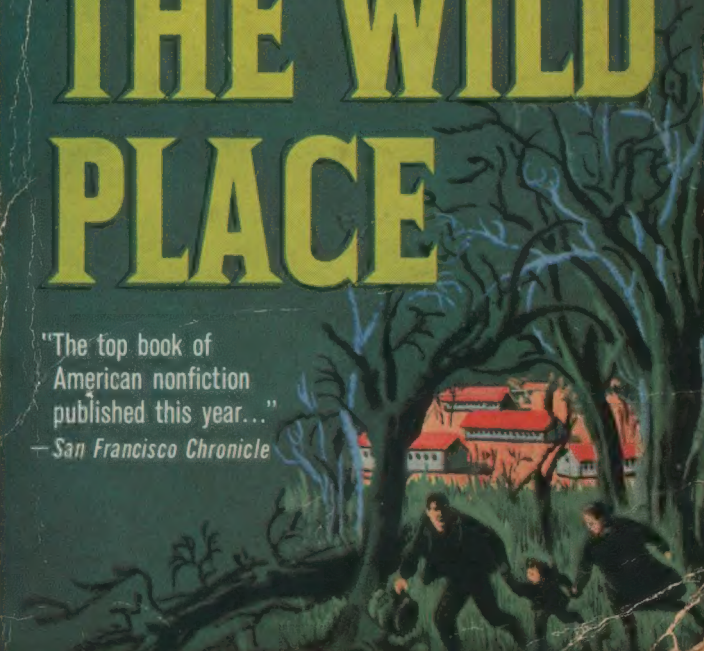
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THE WILD PLACE

Atlantic-Little, Brown edition published October, 1953

CARDINAL edition published April, 1960

1st printing February, 1960

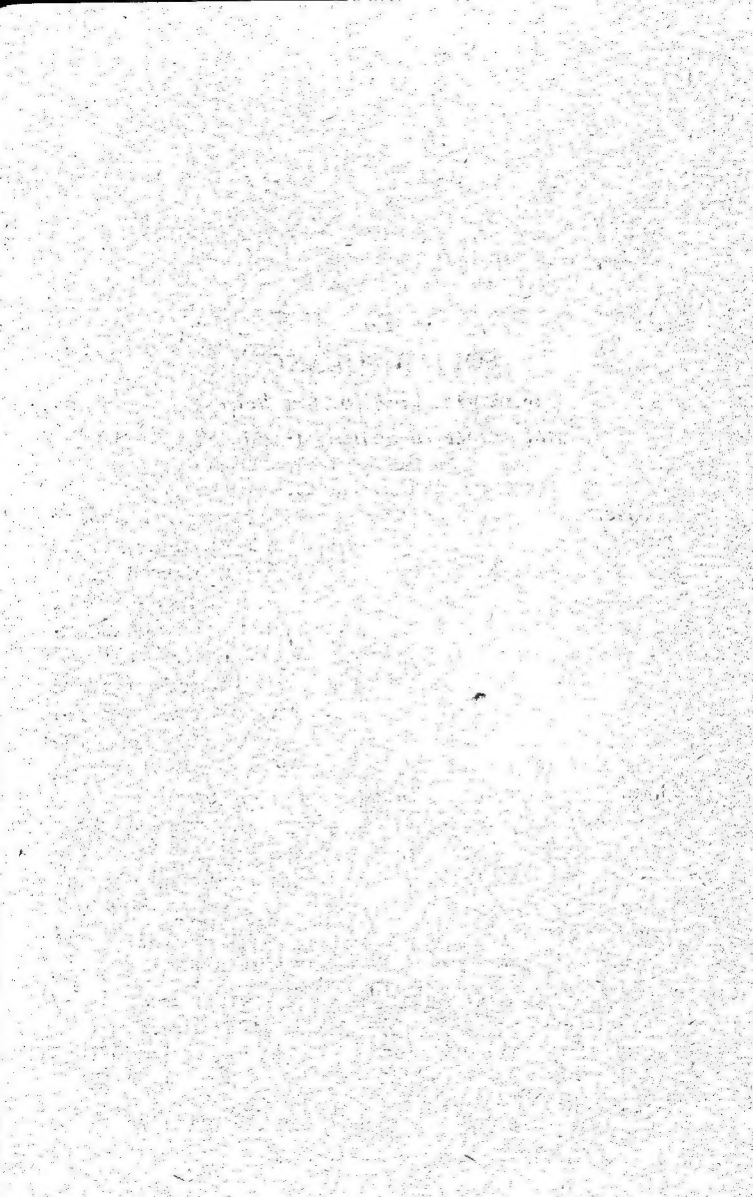
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To
SOLITA SOLANO
*with gratitude for her help
and advice in writing this book*



FOREWORD

THEY CARRIED identity cards that designated them as belonging to no known country or continent but simply to a point on the compass. OST was printed in heavy black letters under the photograph of the bearer. OST, east. A person from the east.

There were some seven million of these compass-point citizens in Nazi Germany, working as slave laborers in the plane and ball-bearing factories, in the textile mills and mines, in the sugar beet and cabbage fields, and all the registered slaves carried these peculiar passports naming OST as their place of origin. Whenever the Nazi guards demanded a show of identification, they undoubtedly looked at that single word OST and felt that in one way most certainly their Führer's mystical *Drang nach Osten* had paid off well. The only ones who did not carry such cards were those behind the barbed wire of the concentration camps: their only identification was a number branded or tattooed on the inside of the right arm.

When this vast population of slaves was uncovered by the Allied armies in 1945, they had been OST people for nearly six years, ever since the first Nazi blitz into Poland and the later thrusts onward and eastward through the Ukraine and up as far as the little Balt republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, which stood then like outposts of democracy only some three hundred miles from Leningrad and facing out toward Sweden across the Baltic Sea. Since the majority of them had been brought into Germany as war plunder and obviously had to have come from somewhere more specific than a direction in space, the Allies invented a new name for the OST peo-

ple, indicating their state of being rather than a generalized place of origin. They were named Displaced Persons.

Smoke was still curling from the blasted ruins of a vanquished Germany when the first relief teams of UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) were probing the desolation in search of this new kind of debris of modern war, the displaced ones, of whom the Army had managed to dispatch almost five million back to their homelands, leaving the remainder to be found, counted and cared for. These had been rounded up under whatever roofs had been left intact, usually under the roofs of the great Wehrmacht barracks, which had been as ubiquitous as railroad stations throughout the land, but which, unlike the stations, had been occasionally skipped over by the Allied precision bombers, probably on foresighted orders.

Like the displaced persons assigned to their care, the relief teams were themselves a new phenomenon. The teams were made up of nationals from many of the Allied countries and they were, in a sense, the United Nations in a test tube: small groups of a dozen or so representing five or six different countries, not sitting in diplomatic politeness around some international round table with earphones at each place to give simultaneous translations, but thrown off into the wilderness of World War II's destruction like small wandering tribes from Babel, to live together all twenty-four hours around the clock with no escape in any direction, to break bread together three times daily and to do a work that had never been done before. And, in the beginning, with not much more to do it with than the two hands, the smile and the trust in God which each one took to the field as basic equipment.

This is the story of one small part of that immense experiment described by Roosevelt at the round table conference that created UNRRA—"As in most of the complex and difficult things in life, nations will learn to work together only by actually working together." It is a story of the small part played by just one group of people in the United States Zone of Occupation in Germany, in the strange half-world of the DP camps, where two million of Europe's uprooted lived

bracketed between two liberations—the first from the Nazis in 1945, and the second from the camps themselves, anywhere from 1947 until 1952, when the final families acceptable for emigration elsewhere were safely salvaged at last.

During those years until the first emigration doors opened, which seemed somehow to be outside of time, what you really were watching was the slow stumbling progress of a world learning how to become its brother's keeper; but you could not know that then. You were down in the eventful grass-roots. Closed away from that outside world as effectively as if you inhabited a small planet adrift from earth like a raft in space, you knew only the queer inverted life of the DP camps, which had to be learned step by step because never before had anything quite like it been even imagined—except possibly by the artist who painted the Sistine's "Last Judgment," or by the author of *Alice in Wonderland*.

anything new or different until after the DP Act would be passed, which would give us another wheel to work on.

And then the Jews came.

We had never had a Jewish camp in our northern area and had been slightly patronized by team members from the Jewish camps around Munich for this blind spot in our DP experience, as if our two years with Poles, Balts and Ukrainians counted for little.

"You haven't entered into the spirit of the thing till you've tried to run a Jewish camp," they said. "Wildflecken? *Pfui!* Not even rehearsal."

The Jews numbered less than one fifth of our Zone's total DP population but they were such an articulate minority that if you only read the newspapers to learn about Occupation affairs, you gained the impression that they were the whole of the DP problem. They made the headlines regularly, especially when their camps were cited for closing. They would stage hunger strikes in protest and frighten the wits out of Army and IRO by their wailing and wasting away. You had to handle them with kid gloves, it was said, especially when transferring them from one camp to another, and heaven help the IRO worker who left a loop of barbed wire visible in any camp to which they were to be transferred. They were classified "persecutees"—the only DP's except medical cases who got a special food ration because of a nonworker status. They sounded like the prima donnas of the DP world, but I thought that perhaps they deserved the rating. I knew that some of those Jews had survived the last stand in the Warsaw ghetto and that a great many of them who had survived the concentration-camp ovens had lived like hunted animals until the liberation. Despite their apocryphal publicity, it stood to reason that they could not be more than the ashes of a people and I waited for them with mingled emotions of alarm and compassion.

For days prior to our scheduled reception of seventeen hundred Jewish DP's from a camp over near the Czech border, we received their inspecting delegations. They were not the ashes

of a people at all. They were charged with the intensest life force I had ever experienced. From the moment of my first encounter with their contrary, critical and demanding leaders, I had the feeling that I was dealing not with people but with phoenixes. The wild way they used up their energies, which their thin wiry bodies seemed incapable of generating in the first place, was alarming to behold. Their smoldering eyes looked like burnt holes but they missed absolutely nothing, as if the flames that had passed through them had only sharpened their sight. Their voices were unmusical and hoarse from violent expostulation and their hands moved continuously in manual dialogue of a derisory nature. They didn't seem like DP's at all. "We Jews . . ." they said, and it was like hearing ancestral portraits speak. You wondered if they even bothered to carry DP identity cards as they passed through this phase of their centuries-old displacement.

We showed off the big camp we were making ready for them, like rental agents proud of an accommodation that was, without doubt, the handsomest DP housing in all Bavaria. It was a whole air base near Würzburg, built originally to house Goering's kingly Luftwaffe and just recently vacated by American air-force officers and their wives. The Jewish delegates viewed the neat small officers' houses with gardens and white picket fences around, the creamy woodwork and rose-tinted walls inside, the varnished stairways and windows opening out on fresh vistas of farmland. The rabbis shook their heads. It didn't seem to be good enough. They talked all the time among themselves in excitable Yiddish that had a sound of liking what they saw, but when they addressed us in German, it was only to point out defects. Only one kitchen for every four apartments? . . . It would make bad blood among their housewives.

"But American housewives got along peaceably," we said.

"We Jews . . ." Their hands flew around almost faster than the eye could follow.

We led them to the other half of the air-base camp where enlisted men's blockhouses stood in rows around a central plaza. We told them like conspirators that the IRO engineers

had even appropriated materials from the sacred reserves of the Resettlement Center to patch up broken windows and restore pilfered light sockets. They inspected the setting that could house some two thousand and shook their heads more vigorously. Fifteen hundred could never squeeze in here, they said. And as for those mess kitchens (with rows of gleaming fifty-gallon cookers in perfect repair), they would never be adequate to prepare the kosher foods for their special groups. Walking from building to building, the rabbis kept glancing over the rich farm valley that held the air base as in a shallow saucer rimmed prettily in places with blackthorn hedges in snowy bloom. I thought they were approving their healthy pastoral surroundings until one of them said mournfully, "It is lonely here. No big cities."

There was a small German community set down on the highway that divided the two halves of the camp. The delegates talked excitedly as they looked at the beer hall, the rural police and bus stations and the stone farmhouses clustered around. Maybe, I thought, they accept this in lieu of a city; but when they came out of their energy-burning huddle, they said that this was the most dangerous feature of all; the IRO must agree to arm their Jewish police to protect their people from these Germans living in their midst. A few Germans were standing about listening to the explosive Yiddish and looking more ready to ask protection from the coming invasion than to attack it. That nearly every German in that village would be cheerfully in the employ of the Jews within a fortnight after their arrival never even entered my head as I soothingly promised to plead for authorization to arm a DP police. Anything to assure a smooth move without incident, Sam had said, anything short of the moon. . . .

They bade us farewell with a strange old-world courtesy, saying that perhaps our air-base camp would do for the short time they would be in it. Soon they would be starting the emigration to Israel so what matter what kind of camp we offered? Fire leaped from their burnt-out eyes when they said the word. *Ees-rye-yel, Ees-rye-yell*! It was startling to hear a sound of music from those raw scrawny throats.

We watched them drive away in a small fleet of battered sedans, obviously the result of some fast trading with the Germans. Our transport officer, whose duty it was to impound every private car owned by DP's, gazed with frank admiration at the parade of forbidden vehicles and said, "They even organize Army gas for those jalopies."

"They're bringing in an entire clothing factory!" said Londa. "And d'ye know, I'm asked to requisition that empty hall in the German section for their school. They don't want our DP nurses. They run their own medical show, they said. They don't even need penicillin from us!"

It seemed as if we were all talking faster than usual, as if contact with those rabbis robed in rusty black had somehow rejuvenated us.

I couldn't find any familiar words to describe what I had felt about the Jewish DP's. I only knew that I had been on the begging end of the negotiations all the way through, that it was a pleasurable new experience in my DP work and that I had been arguing, not with ordinary people, but with something almost abstract and transcendental, like a phoenix or a naked idea.

All seventeen hundred Jews came to us on a rainy day in mid-May, in bulging boxcars that stretched seemingly for miles back of the bombed airplane hangars where the railroad siding was. We had paced off the difficult unloading terrain and the siding that held only six or eight cars at a time. We had beaten into the heads of our DP truck drivers the stiff Army order to keep off the mile-long cement runways that crisscrossed the airfield and offered multiple-choice direct routes to the camp. We had led the drivers over the bumpy road that passed around the airfield's edge and through a barricaded gate and had shown them the guardhouse where the Jewish billeting master would sit and hand out to each incoming individual a slip naming blockhouse and room number. That way, our Jewish delegation had said, there could be no argument. It looked like the most beautifully organized reception that had ever been plotted on paper.

The Jewish DP police in woolly green tunics, with the Star

of David on their caps, were the first to leap from the boxcars. They thrust aside Georgi's specially selected Balt and Ukrainian police and took up battle stations along the tracks. The gentry destined for the officers' section of the camp would descend first. The billeting master turned out to be a woman named Rachel, a compact bundle of energy with red cheeks and snapping black eyes who could outshout the Jewish police and the clothing-factory men who wanted to put their valuable machinery first into the waiting trucks. Our unloading plan seemed to fall to pieces in the pandemonium. Across the forbidden airstrips of the flying field, the first of our DP truck drivers to have been bribed by eager householders (out of sight of Rachel's commanding eyes) were piloting heaped-high trucks like crazy barnstormers, with our transport officer jeeping after them in hot pursuit. In the din of wild hoarse shouting, of crates thumping to the ground, of trucks roaring off without orders and violent quarrels going on in any place where two or more people were gathered, you couldn't think of anything to do except to follow the nearest moving object and hope that it would lead you somehow out of the chaos.

I followed Rachel to the room-assignment office in the guardhouse down by the airfield gate, whose red-and-white barricade was now but a splintered stump recording some swift passage through it. I watched her lay out her listing of seventeen hundred names, each with an explicit room number appended. Already, by my calculation of the renegade trucks, at least three hundred people had captured the rooms with views in the officers' section of the camp. I wondered how she would ever come out of it. I didn't know (until weeks afterwards) that I was watching one of the few women who had crawled out of the deathtrap of the Warsaw ghetto through the flooded sewers that led to the Aryan side, carrying a packet of priceless ammunition above her head, above the fetid waters that shelved her chin on slime. What she had to come out of now was child's play.

By the time the first legally loaded trucks appeared at the guardhouse, the first illegal squatters were back from the of-

ficers' billets demanding assignment to the room numbers Rachel was handing out calmly to the people in the trucks. I could only deduce that she told them to fight it out among themselves because that was what they promptly proceeded to do. Yiddish splattered around hot as machine-gun fire. The light May rain seemed to evaporate in the murderous heat above the trucks where bits of numbered paper were shaken in faces purple with rage. If you shut your eyes, you had the impression that people were being beaten, racked and throttled. I cowered in the guardhouse beside Rachel.

"Such a people," she said scornfully. "I am ashamed that you should see." She pounded her brown fist down on hands reaching through the window and cried "Ach!" as one exclaims when killing flies. She saved her real voice until the crowd began to invade her tiny office to read the billeting list over her shoulder; then her stream of Yiddish caught them like a fire hose, dashing them out the door and back into their trucks to await their turns in proper sequence.

"You would not think we have organization," she said between blasts at the clamoring throng. But I was already beginning to see the shape of order in that seeming chaos as truck after truck howled and shouted its way past the guardhouse and on toward the camp, an entire population turning about the single powerful young matriarch who had the final word in every dispute and laid it down like Law. She could do this because every room had been assigned with plan and foresight weeks before the move, when their welfare committees had sat over the air-base floor plans and had matched families to rooms with a thoroughness that left no ground for argument since children got southern exposures, old people the first-floor spaces, and doctors, rabbis and chiefs of all the turbulent camp activities the quieter cottages of the officers' section. Nothing had been left to chance or last-minute improvisation although everything looked as if it had. The superbly organized Jews ran their own show the way they wanted it—fast, efficient and tumultuous as an incoming tide, a tide that brought us not only seventeen hundred people with dark broody eyes and imperishable vocal cords, but also the driving

spirit that animated them all, a passionate nationalism for a country that had just been born and was still a bitter battleground.

Israell Zion! The tensions and strife of that bony bridge of land did not seem thousands of miles distant in Palestine. Each day's developments were re-enacted right there in the air-base camp in the middle of rural Bavaria. Military Government warned us that our Jews must be quiet and behave like other DP's until the proper time came when it would be safe to allow them to emigrate to their new homeland. The way the Jews looked at us when we tried to explain the humanitarian idea of not repatriating people to a battleground made us feel as if we were talking rubbish. Rachel's welfare office was hung with martial posters depicting young Jewish girls in trenches hurling grenades at Arabs. The Jewish DP police practiced marksmanship with the carbines we had secured for them—as "defense" against the Germans who were now gainfully employed in the heavy manual labor of the camp. The Jewish workshops swung into swift production of fine woolen greatcoats and stout leather shoes heavily hobnailed for rough terrain. We could only guess that this too was all for Israel and, through some mysterious channels, was ultimately delivered there. We never saw any of our Jewish DP's wearing the useful clothing.

The dynamic drive of our new DP's to get some place other than the U.S.A. was such a reversal, after our years of doorwatching with other DP's, that we ceased for a time to think of those others or even of the Resettlement Center that had been our final focal emotion. Each day we hurried to the air-base camp, half expecting to find that it had blown up with the force of its own internal combustion since we had left it seething the night before. Each of us had specific jobs to do in the "settling in" of the new camp but we all felt like fifth wheels on a wagon hitched to a comet. All sorts of organizations swarmed in to take care of their own people. The Jewish Agency for Palestine handled the enrollments for Israel. The American ORT set up machinery workshops and taught schoolboys, who stood no taller than gnomes before the big

forges, to turn out fine precision tools; mechanics were needed in Israel. The American Joint Distribution Committee brought in raw materials for clothing and cobbler shops and special food reinforcements to the IRO ration to build back, we concluded, some of the mass energy burnt up daily in the excited never-ending talk about Israel. Over all the ferment and frenzy flapped a flag we had never seen before, a delicate ethereal flag of pale blue stripes on a white ground with the Star of David stitched in narrow blue bands in the center of the field. It was an age-old dream coming to life under our eyes, but we could not realize that until long afterwards.

Possibly we never would have been able to tear ourselves away from the engrossing drama of the Jewish camp if "Operation Bird Dog" had not been suddenly announced. Sam had mysteriously prepared his team supervisors for some momentous news and had ordered us to go back to Aschaffenburg and to stick by the telephones there, no matter what hell might be breaking loose elsewhere in the area.

Near midnight on the fifteenth of June, 1948, he blitz-called us to announce that Operation Bird Dog was in effect. This was the most closely guarded secret of the U.S. Zone and the only one, to my knowledge, that the DP's did not know about in advance. It was the great overnight currency reform which was to set Western Germany on its financial feet, wipe out the old reichsmark, which had less value than second-hand wallpaper and institute the Deutsche Mark, valued roughly at 4.2 to the dollar, almost at par with the solid Swiss franc. Within the next forty-eight hours, Sam said, every inhabitant in the land, including our DP's, would be permitted to exchange up to forty reichsmarks on a one-to-one basis for the new Deutsche Marks which had been printed nine months earlier by the U.S. Treasury Department in the darkest secrecy of its deepest vaults.

It was as exciting as receiving another Jewish camp. At dawn next day I drove over the mountains to pick up from Military Post in Würzburg sacks of the crisp new currency to pay off our six thousand DP's in the Aschaffenburg area. Every IRO worker, including this time our doctors and nurses,

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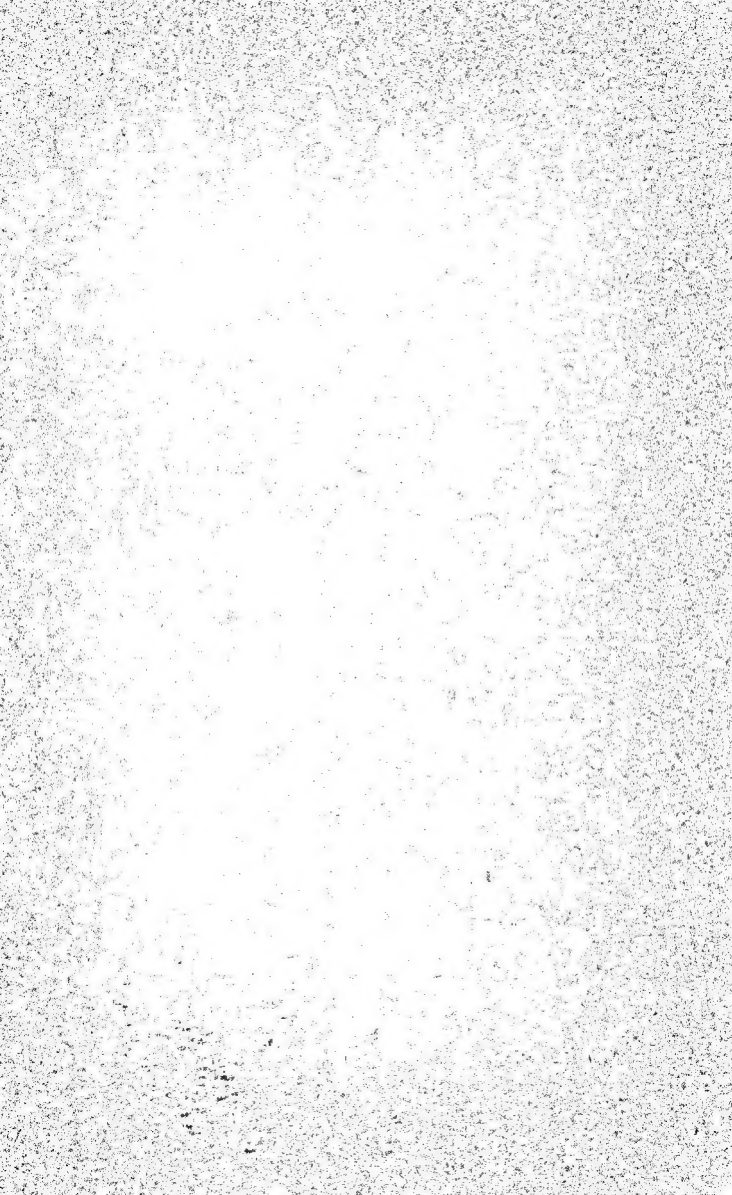
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